

THE Drive FOR

Plenty of minorities are interested in golf, but they'll need a few more bucks

A television news crew plants a minority golfer at a golf course, intent on gauging the reaction of the facility's management, staff and players. Will the undercover experiment pass without incident? Will the African-American player feel at home? How about the person of Asian or Hispanic descent?

A somewhat similar scenario actually unfolded recently at a NASCAR track. An NBC news magazine sent a group of Muslim-looking men to a race to document anti-Muslim sentiment. By all reports, no one bothered the men.

Whether we've progressed to the point where prejudice increasingly is becoming a non-story is debatable. Certainly golf — long considered the “white man's sport” — has a nasty reputation to shed. But with revenue stagnant or lacking at courses across the country, the golf industry is having to cater to the very minorities it once shunned.

“If you ask me, it's low-hanging fruit in the golf business if people want to market toward minorities,” says Sean Hoolehan, the certified superintendent at Wildhorse Resort and Casino in Pendleton, Ore. “We're behind the curve as far as introducing minorities to the game because they didn't have access in the past. And as they are getting access, it's a growing segment.”

According to a 2003 survey conducted by the National Golf Foundation (NGF), there are as many as 14 million minorities who are “at least a little interested” in playing golf. However, only 5.5 million minorities actually played at least a round of golf or visited a golf practice facility in the previous year. If the industry is to once



BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ, MANAGING EDITOR

Diversity

(and buddies) to play with if they're going to boost the industry

again thrive, it will need to attract some of those 8.5 million minorities who are finding some reason to stay away from the golf course.

"If people don't play golf, I won't have a job," says Rafael Barajas, the certified superintendent at Hacienda Golf Club in La Habra Heights, Calif. "I firmly feel that if we don't tap into the minorities, golf is going to have a problem down the road. There's a great opportunity to grow the game."

Barajas, more than most, realizes the difficulties that confront minorities on the golf course. He arrived in California via Colima, Mexico, at age 14, able to speak only four words of English. Yet he broke through all barriers to become a superintendent at 20 and earn certification at the unusually early age of 27.

"There were plenty of obstacles. I was very young and had a lack of education. And to top that off, being Hispanic, I knew going into some interviews that I had no chance,"

Barajas says. "However, I didn't focus on that. I was glad to get the interviews to hone my interview skills. That was not going to let me down."

While climbing the superintendent ranks, Barajas became a 5-

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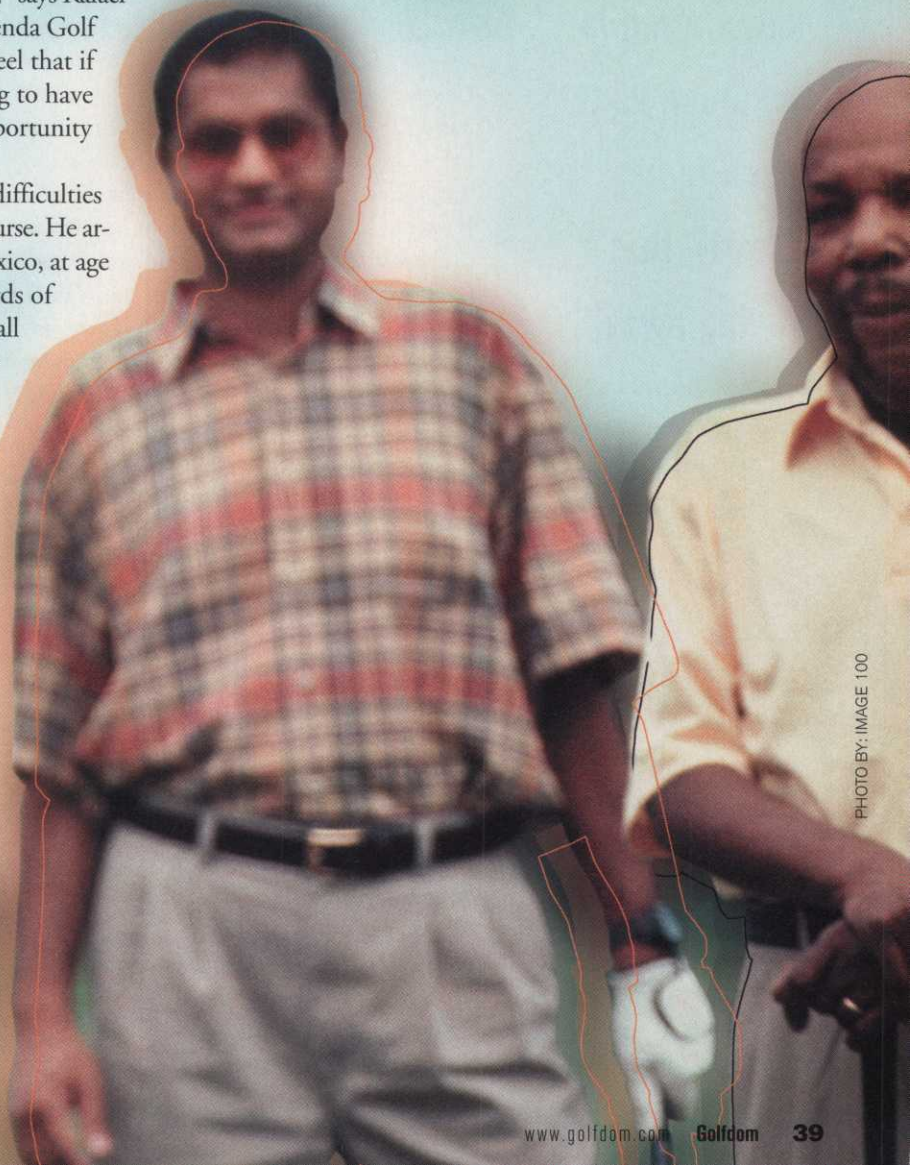


PHOTO BY: IMAGE 100



“I don’t think the staring is as much as it used to be. Slowly, that’s fading away.”

RAFAEL BARAJAS,
CERTIFIED SUPERINTENDENT,
HACIENDA GOLF CLUB

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handicap. Again, he made the accomplishment look easier than it was. At first, like many minorities, he couldn’t afford his own clubs. If a set of loaners wasn’t available, he trekked to the lost-and-found to mix and match sets. Once bitten by the golf bug, he had a difficult time finding other Hispanics to play alongside him. And without strength in numbers, visiting a golf course became all the more intimidating.

“I remember going to public golf courses and I wouldn’t want to go into the clubhouses. I didn’t feel welcome,” Barajas says. “People would just look at you, like, ‘What are you doing here?’ It wasn’t very inviting at all. It wasn’t friendly.”

That was in the 1980s and early ’90s. Since then, rare is the day when Barajas goes to a course — he’s played in the last 10 superintendent national championships — and feels like a second-class citizen; even, to his surprise, at a tournament in Mobile, Ala. “I don’t think the staring is as much as it used to be,” Barajas says. “Slowly, that’s fading away.”

But has it dissipated to the point where Asian-, Hispanic- and African-Americans can feel comfortable playing golf? More importantly, can they even afford the desire?

Not surprisingly, 70.8 percent of the core

golfers in the United States — those who play at least eight times a year — boast an annual household income of more than \$50,000, including 32.1 percent who earn more than \$100,000, according to a 2005 study by the NGF. While golf may be shedding its “white man’s” tag, disposing of its “rich man’s” label might be another story.

“I know if I had to pay, I couldn’t play the amount I even play,” Jerry Moore says.

Instead, Moore, the general manager at Alfred Tup Holmes Golf Course in Atlanta, gets to play free of charge whenever he finds the time. Meanwhile, his clients, about 60 percent of whom, like him, are black, have to balance their need to pay the mortgage with their desire to play the only course in Georgia named after an African-American.

“Cost of the game itself is prohibitive,” Moore says. “If I have \$40 in my pocket, do I eat, put gas in my car or go enjoy myself and the heck with the rest?”

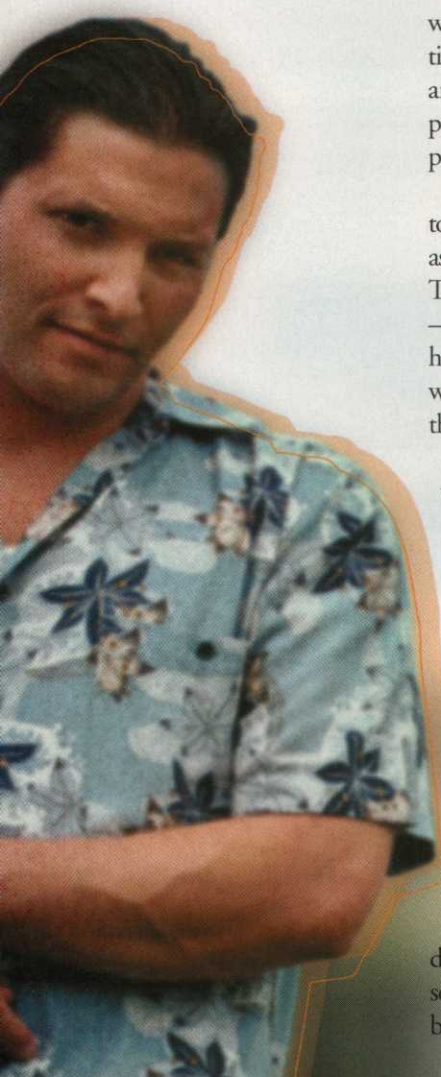
And while golf expenses aren’t discriminatory, the economic status of African-Americans is disparate. The median household income for blacks is about 56 percent of that of whites, according to a recent report by the National Urban League. The unemployment rate for African-Americans is 10 percent, compared with 4.4 percent for Caucasians.

“No doubt the equipment and the sport are expensive,” Barajas says. “If you’re making \$8 an hour and you have a family of four and your house payment or rent payment is \$1,000, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out you aren’t going to have enough money to buy clubs or balls or pay for the green fees, even if they’re \$45, \$50 at the muni course. That’s a big hurdle that needs to be overcome.”

Nonetheless, a rich African-American is just as likely as a rich Caucasian to splurge on golf, according to the 2003 NGF survey. Participation rates among incomes more than \$100,000 are between 20 percent and 30 percent for both whites and minorities.

“I hear that all the time — that if we want to grow golf in the minority population, we have to make golf courses affordable,” Hoolehan says. “I don’t think that’s the case anymore. Affluence isn’t limited to white people any-

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more. I think there are plenty of minorities who can afford to play the game of golf."

Nonetheless, the NGF stresses that the golf industry should focus on attracting more blue-collar minorities. Unfortunately, a less-wealthy Hispanic golfer is not as likely as a less-wealthy white golfer to play the game. The participation rates for those who earn between \$50,000 and \$75,000 are between 19 percent and 24 percent for Caucasians and 8 percent and 18 percent for minorities.

Moore has done his best to lure repeat customers and new players, although proposals such as 2-for-1 deals are "falling on deaf ears," he says. The primary determinant of his revenue stream — the region's employment rate — is out of his hands. "The guy I see today, I want to see next week," he says, "and I've not come up with anything that can lure him out here."

For those minorities, as well as Caucasians, who can afford to play the game, it is vital that they do so while accompanied by friends. Among the core golfers who responded to the NGF's consumer profile study last year, 94 percent listed "friends" as their first choice for a playing partner.

"If your friends don't play golf, you just don't want to play," Hoolehan says. "You'll be less intimidated if you're playing with someone who you like and know and who's going to be helping you."

Taking the same principle one step further, specific demographic groups tend to feel more comfortable among similar demographics and familiar settings. Hoolehan sees it all the time at his course, which is owned by three American Indian tribes — the Cayuse,

Money Talks: The More You Got, the More You Play

Income does make a difference when it comes to playing golf, which makes it tougher for the industry to attract many minorities.

Household Income	Core Golfers	U.S. Population
<\$30,000	13.1%	35%
\$30,000-39,999	9.0%	11.2%
\$40,000-49,999	7.2%	9.6%
\$50,000-74,999	22.4%	18.0%
\$75,000-99,999	16.3%	11.0%
\$100,000+	32.1%	15.1%

Umatilla and Walla Walla.

"Although there's a country club in town, and certainly they've had Indian members at the club, I still don't think there's the sense of belonging that (Native Americans) have when they play at their own golf course," Hoolehan says. "When they walk in, they look around and see people who look like them. How intimidating it must be for a guy who's going to go to a club that's 5 percent minorities. He's going to stick out like a sore thumb. So it takes an extraordinary individual to break those barriers."

Sony Lyndsay tries to erase those obstacles. The general manager and superintendent at Revolution Park, located within an African-American neighborhood in Charlotte, operates his nine-hole course with the pleasures and concerns of his clientele in mind.

"It isn't that we cater to African-Americans, it's just that we are located where the African-

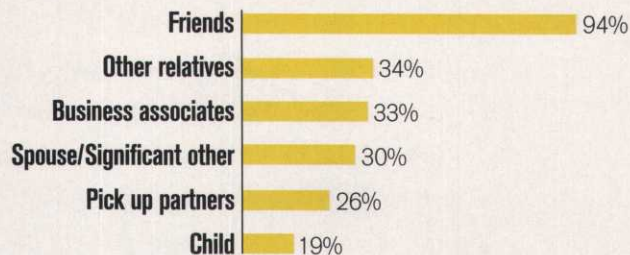
[ABOUT THIS SERIES] "Growing the Game," a four-part series appearing in *Golfdom* throughout 2006, will focus on how the golf industry can attract more new players and create more rounds from four distinct groups: **disabled people; women; children; and minorities**, including African-Americans and Hispanics. *Golfdom* will speak with representatives from people representing each of these segments to get their views on what the golf industry needs to do to attract more players from their segments. Then we'll speak with golf industry representatives to see what the industry is doing and what plans it has to grow the game within these segments.



◀ Part three of the series, on women golfers, runs in August.

Waiting on a Friend

Core players overwhelmingly prefer to play with friends, which makes it all the tougher for those exceptional minorities who are interested in the game and willing to spend the money to play.



Note: percentages add to greater than 100 percent due to multiple responses.

SOURCE: NGF'S GOLF CONSUMER PROFILE 2005

Americans live," Lyndsay says. "If you walk into our pro shop, this isn't a course with \$80 shirts and \$100 shoes."

Instead, it's a course where each of the nine holes is dedicated to an African-American golfer, such as Charlie Sifford, the former PGA Tour player who, Lyndsay says, got his start at Revolution Park when it was known as Bonnie Brae. In two years a minority golfers hall of fame will be built on the site of a recently torn-down recreation center and swimming pool. And The First Tee youth program will soon set up shop at the course.

"I really wanted to give something back to the neighborhood," says Lyndsay, who is white. "This was going to be turned into a sort of cruising park, so young kids could come in and cruise in the afternoon. But people in the neighborhood stopped that. If it wasn't for the citizens of the neighborhood, the golf course wouldn't even be here."

The end of Revolution Park, in turn, would have taken with it a living history of African-American golfers and their experiences.

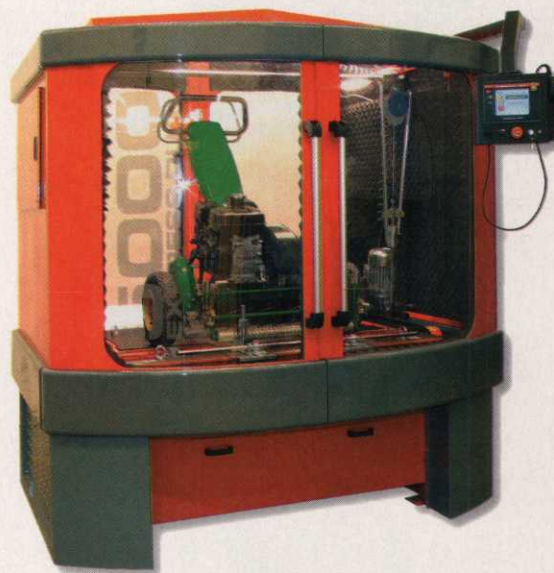
"I've been hanging around the golf course for years and hearing the tales about how the black golfers had been treated," Lyndsay says. "I mean, this is their golf course. This is where they come in the afternoon to watch golf and play golf, even on the weekends. This is their country club. To hear the guys talk, there was a lot of resentment the way things were done years ago."

There's still plenty of room for improvement, Barajas says, although not necessarily at the professional level, thanks to minority athletes such as Tiger Woods, Michelle Wie and Pat Perez. Hoolehan agrees, saying role models are already in place.

"I look at young Indian kids, and if you bring Davis Love out there to do a promo, they look up at Davis and don't see themselves. They see a well-to-do, rich white guy," Hoolehan says. "Now you bring Notah Begay out here, and they look at him and see themselves, their brothers and their dads, they see someone they can aspire to be and they think, 'Hey, he can do it, so can I.'"

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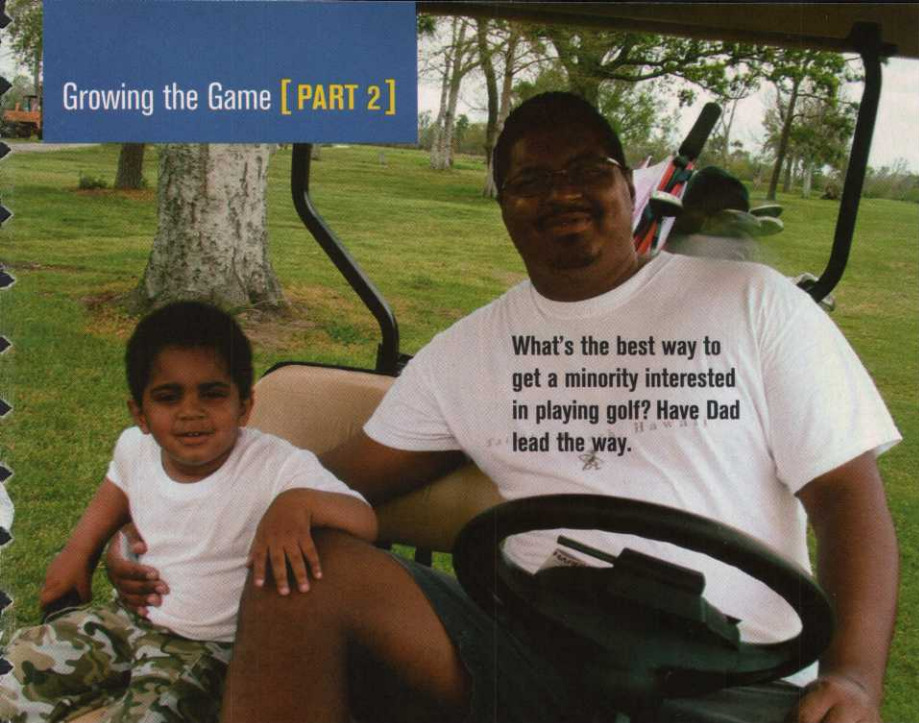
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Superintendents, of course, don't have the clout of a Tiger Woods. And while there's a fair amount they can do to promote play among wider-ranging demographics — lower green fees for the less wealthy; soften the course for high handicappers; promote The First Tee for children; relax dress codes and rules of the game for novices — they're more limited in what they can do specifically to boost minority play.

Yet sometimes it's the little things that make the biggest difference. Barajas himself got hooked on the game at age 16 after a Caucasian member of Sunset Hills Country Club, where Barajas was working, had given him a used set of Arnold Palmers with aluminum shafts.

"I'd get off the mower," Barajas says, "and he would let me hit some shots on the golf course. He saw me hit a couple of good shots, and he said, 'I'll get you a set of clubs.' I guess he went into his garage and dug up a set of old clubs. I kept those clubs for a long time. And it didn't take long before I started beating my brothers."

Barajas never got the gentleman's name, although he has forwarded the good deed. He recently hired a Hispanic teenager — one who looked like a gang member, he says — to work on his staff.

"I said, 'Look, you want to change, fine, no problem. I'll help you, but here's

the path you have to go,'" Barajas says. "He's turned out to be one of my great kids. I'm getting ready to give him a pay increase after six months and put him on a lead role to maintain some of the bunkers. He's excited about that. He's no longer a baldheaded kid who looks like gangbanger."

Impressed by the teen's progress, Barajas now wants to give him a driver in addition to a bunker rake. "The next step is to try to get him into the game," Barajas says. Every Monday, when Hacienda is closed to the public, Barajas takes his entirely Hispanic crew to the driving range, where he teaches them the game.

"I try to encourage them to play golf. And I try to get some clubs donated from members," Barajas says. "If they understand the game of golf, they will do a better job and we'll have a better product out there, which will make my life a lot easier. And the second thing is, golf is a great game, a phenomenal game, and if we can get one or two guys hooked up, maybe I can start the snowball."

Barajas has certainly made a name for himself as a minority superintendent and player. Hoolehan, the president of the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, calls him perhaps the organization's "Jackie Robinson story."

"Rafael is just a tremendous guy," Hoolehan says. "He is a true American story." ■

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